

Through the Dark Night: The Dreaded Call to Action

We were having our usual late Thursday night dinner at the local barbeque house. It was mid-January. Just me, my partner, Brad, and the old postman at his corner table, finishing up our chopped pork plates and randomly discussing our day.

I was drifting to thoughts of seeing my daughter, Alex, soon. She had been traveling in Europe for the past 7 months with her boyfriend, Steve, and they recently sailed across the Atlantic to Barbados on their journey home. It was the hardest month of my life with no communication from Alex, not knowing if she was dead or alive in a 17-meter sailboat with 7 men on the open seas. When I found out 2 days after Christmas that she was finally on land, my frightened soul was soothed.

Then, in one brutal instant, my world froze again. It was a call from my oldest sister, Gail.

“Mare, this is Gail. Dad had a stroke. It’s bad. He’s on the way to the hospital. Audrey is going there right now.” I heard the dread in her voice, and felt it stab me in the chest. Mechanically, I proceeded. “My Dad had a stroke. I have to go.” No time for emotional outbursts. This was his second stroke, and he’d already lived seven years longer than predicted after his major heart attack.

This is serious. What if this is it?

Brad and I quickly drove home in silence.

Once home, I started packing my suitcase in a sort of trance. Brad came up with the logistics. “You can’t drive alone. I’ll get the truck and trailer. We’ll haul your car, so you’ll have it to stay as long as

you need to. We'll meet in town and leave tonight. Can you be ready in half an hour and meet me at Exit 12?" I nodded yes.

As I finished packing, memories, images, voices of my Dad and the recent times we shared were flooding in. I was so senseless and numb that I stood outside with my luggage, in the cold, waiting. Where was Brad? OH MY GOSH! I forgot to drive to Exit 12. Brad called, "Are you coming?" I tossed my things in the car, turned the key and drove. I was on that journey no one ever wants to take.

Hours in darkness, drifting in and out of sleep, sending e-mails, texts, taking care of responsibilities at home, work, for pets, household, in the wee hours of the morning. I thought, "I've been a family therapist for 31 years. I've heard the stories from my clients of the difficult times when a parent is sick, possibly dying. I may have to be there for my family, with all my wisdom and knowledge." But, wait a minute ...

There IS no wisdom or knowledge about this exact experience. I searched my brain. Have I ever taken a course, workshop, read a book on what to do after getting the call that your parent was seriously ill and on the way to the hospital? Have I ever heard anyone, patient, colleague, friend, or other family member discuss what they *actually did* as they waited in the hospital? Well, no, actually, no!

My organizational brain was giving me the best directives it could: "If Dad comes out of this, I guess we'll do what we did last time, guided by the instructions from his Doctors and nurses. If he doesn't recover, then what? WHAT?" The question was screaming in my head. During a call while on the drive, my friend, another seasoned therapist, told me, "You'll know what to do. Trust your

experience as a therapist to guide you.” I went to sleep. Six hours later, I walked into my Dad’s hospital room. The very moment I entered I knew my “therapist” self had exited.

There was my youngest sister, Audrey. Oh, the pain and fear in her face. She was with Dad at his house when he had his stroke 8 hours earlier. “He’s waking up,” Audrey said. I rushed to his side. Dad was minimally conscious, had a tube down his throat, other tubes going into his veins, and his eyes were slightly opened. I knew he recognized me, and saw his raised eyebrows, his way of acknowledging and saying “Hello.” I took his hand and he gripped mine hard; and he never let go.

I felt completely on my own then. Raw and vulnerable. I was a daughter and a sister. Nothing else. I walked into an experience there was no preparation for, no guidance, no book or pamphlet like you get at the Doctor’s office, no idea of the steps to walk along this dark, frightening journey.

Audrey was depleted. She had been with Dad at the hospital now for seven straight hours, with no sleep. The fortunate thing about having multiple siblings is that you can take shifts during times like these. We knew the drill. She was off the clock now, would go back to my Dad’s home where my Mom was, see about Mom, get some sleep and be ready for the next shift. Brad, who drove all night nonstop was trying to sleep on the sofa in the room. He would leave first thing in the morning. I didn’t sleep at all that night.

I sat by Dad’s bedside. I was the only one in the room awake at that point. How am I ever going to handle this? My “therapist knowledge and wisdom” applied to other families, but when it came to my own situation, I could do nothing else but stay firmly planted in the present moment, hoping for some clue as to what to do, how to act, what to say. “Mindfulness” I finally thought. “This is what I need to do.” This practice of focusing on the immediate experience, staying in the present moment.

observing with all the senses and responding with the knowledge of what was happening.

Mindfulness was something I did and taught to others. Yes, I could do this now. How easy it would be to disengage, distance, even avoid what was happening? No, I would stay present with Dad.

What I soon learned, though, was that I would be taking my lead from him.

When Dad returned to a semi-waking state, he immediately reached for my hand with his left hand, his entire right side paralyzed. He squeezed hard. Again, he never let go. Dad was trying as hard as he could to communicate, his eyes opened now. If he could, he tried to stay connected. I wouldn't have expected anything less of Dad, even in this condition. Dad was the most persistent person I knew. And, he taught me that too.

The true patriarch, Dad had always been the member of the family who pulled everyone together, in times of celebration and times of loss. As a caterer for over 30 years, he orchestrated events for other families too. When he retired 25 years ago, Dad devoted much of his life to finally getting to know his grown children. You see, he and I were virtually strangers for the first 30 years of my life since he basically, only came home to sleep in the wee morning hours. Dad's work ethic was impeccable; his intimate relationship skills, well, they were reserved for the work staff, his customers and vendors. It's something how you think about your parent's entire life from your perspective when you realize you might lose them.

So, now, it was up to me. I was the one who had to pull everyone together. I stepped into this role that I wasn't at all accustomed to. Like all families, we had our roles. Gail was the oldest and usually took charge. I was mostly seen as an instigator, trying to get people to talk, open up about their feelings and, generally, making everyone uncomfortable. The family therapist in the family is

typically, not the most popular person. I had moments of wondering if they'd even listen to me right now.

Well, there was no one else so I swallowed hard and did it my way. I began communicating by phone and text about how Dad was doing as I learned about his condition. I stayed positive and hopeful. In my mind, there was no question about it, he was getting better and he was coming home. During the next six hours, while holding Dad's hand, I was fixated on feeling his fingers frantically moving about in my hand. He never stopped. I believed he was sending Morse code, like he did as a radio officer in the Army decades ago. I struggled at times wanting to Google the morse code chart to try to understand what he was saying. But I knew I had to let that obsession go and stay in my heart in the present moment and just *be* with him, and let my intuition guide me.

We had the most intense, intimate conversations I think we ever had during those precious six hours alone together. I felt him say, "Thank you for being here and for believing in me. I'm not letting go. I'm pushing through. I'll keep moving my body until I'm back. I'm fighting hard. Don't leave me. Don't give up on me."

My siblings, daughter, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews all called, and I relayed their messages to Dad. His eyes would open wider, brows raised. His hand squeezed tighter every time I told him, "Gail called, Diane called, Paul called, Audrey called, Mom called, Alex called...they said they love you so much and are coming and will be with you soon." I was also thankful for the technology that allowed me to dictate what the doctors and nurses said and relay this information to my family members, because I never would have remembered a thing if I waited until I could talk to them in person.

When my other siblings arrived, I knew it was time to take my break, go off the clock, try and get some rest, eat something and be ready for my next shift the next day. It was hard to leave Dad's side; but I was truly exhausted. I'd been up with no sleep for 41 hours. And it was my turn to go and stay with Mom at the house. I was the least close to mom of all my siblings and I had been trying for years to establish some closeness. Mom didn't reach out like Dad did, so it was a lot of work to make a connection. Mom and I went out for Chinese food that night. She seemed detached from what was going on. We had some chit chat. Then went home. We decided that night that since she was unable to get around without assistance, Mom should stay home from the hospital for now until Dad was more stable.

During the time I was gone, Dad was fighting the intubation tube and my siblings together with the medical staff decided that he needed to stay intubated, keeping the tube down his throat, due to his lung infection and possible collapse, and sedating him would ease his suffering and stop his struggling. So, they sedated him with Propofol, I learned the next day. They all kept vigil through the night, waiting for morning when he would come to and we would make another assessment.

When morning came, they stopped the sedation. Paul, my brother, called me to let me know that they expected Dad to awaken shortly, urging me to come back to the hospital. When I arrived, they were still waiting expectantly for him to regain consciousness. We thought we would rally together, all five of us and my Mom, have a day to make the medical decisions about his recovery. Instead, we got the shocking realization that it would be the day we began the journey with Dad through his dying. He never regained consciousness.

I was immediately enraged and, at the same time, felt immobilized about what to do with my rage. I wanted to lash out at everyone – my siblings, the medical staff. WHAT THE HELL???? Dad was

telling me yesterday that he was fighting and not to give up on him! I would never have wanted to sedate him. It was good that he was fighting. That was my take on the situation. But, the stronger instinct in me finally said that I needed to work together with my siblings. What could my rage possibly accomplish now? Everyone was so vulnerable, in such pain about the situation. The four of them made the decision when I wasn't there. I couldn't come unglued on them at a time like this. I never felt such contradictory feelings in my life.

My family doctor later told me that the protocol for someone coming out of a stroke is never to sedate them. What were they all thinking? It's still hard for me to swallow this.

I think the moment you know your parent is dying is one of those times when you feel the loneliest. You are in the process. You realize it is a process. My dad was not actively living. And, he had not yet passed. This was so similar to knowing my daughter was sailing the Atlantic Ocean in a small sailing vessel during the month of December and not knowing if she was ok. Two of the most helpless, confusing times in my life, happening back to back.

I leaned on Dad to help me cope with my fears about Alex. Now, who could I lean on with my fears of what was happening to him? Dad was the loving and beloved Patriarch, the rock for each one of us, not just immediate family, but for almost every family member, and most all his friends. The world without him was incomprehensible.

But, back to that day in the hospital room. The room was full. Barely standing room, yet, like the biblical story of the fish and the loaves, there was somehow enough space for everyone. Me, my four siblings, my mother, who is disabled and was in a wheelchair, my brother in law, my daughter, her boyfriend, who had never met the family, and my nephews and their significant others. My Dad

had a living will and his wishes were to refuse any procedures to prolong his life. We knew what we had to do regarding the medical decisions.

After consultation with his doctors, the intubation tube was removed. I remember, there was such a close, warm feeling among all of us at that moment. But, walking with Dad through his dying process? None of us had ever discussed that with each other, and, I don't think it ever crossed our minds. It was like a taboo subject, one so dreaded that no one wants to venture into it. We knew the facts. Dad was 87 years old and had lived with numerous health problems. But, up until the stroke hit him, he was much more active than most of us. I wasn't prepared for this.

The topic of the time AFTER Dad had died had been discussed, among my Dad, Mom, me and my siblings. That is what responsible families do. Make the final arrangements. Plan the settlement of the estate. Gail would be the executor, there was a trust to take care of Mom, who would live with one of us. Those things were understood. I'm sure we had some thoughts of what it would be like with Dad gone from our lives; but we never talked about that painful, emotional part.

What unfolded during the next five days was astounding to me, especially given our complete lack of any preparation. And, it was so markedly different from the majority of stories I had heard over the years as a therapist from clients' whose parents had died. Most of those stories were full of conflict, suspiciousness, distrust, hurt, loneliness, detachment, rivalry and avoidance, during the hospital vigil right on through the funeral and sometimes throughout the years that followed.

In contrast, the steps my family and I walked as Dad was dying were of the most beautiful, fulfilling, rich, and creative experiences of my life. The only experience that comes close to this was my journey of labor and delivery of my daughter, Alex. How profound! Most people would agree that

the birth of a child is a beautiful, joyous experience. But to think that an elderly parents' dying process could be equally as beautiful and joyous is a foreign concept in our culture.

Looking back on it now, I think being fully present during Dad's dying process, and keeping my heart as open as possible, was what allowed Spirit in and helped me make a soul connection with Dad and my family. I had no conscious awareness of choosing this at the time. What I was conscious of was my decision to join with my family and go through this together rather than bring conflict to the situation. It's hard to contain emotional reactivity at a time of crisis. Yet, this is what Dad would have wanted. It's the way he tried to live his life during his retirement years, and, I believe his guidance came through to me, even as he was physically leaving us.

With no prior discussion or preparation, my family and I strengthened our bonds during my Dad's dying process. We stayed in the present moment and stayed close as a family. We respected each other's personal choices. We even trusted our spontaneity, like the wonderful night we decided we could have pajama parties with Dad by spending the night in his hospice room. And we did! All thirteen of us! And I remember staying intuitively tuned in to Dad, often taking the lead from him. And in doing all this, we dignified Dad in so many wonderful ways while he was dying.

On January 20, in the early morning hours, I was alone with my Dad as he lay dying in his hospice bed. I played soothing music and reflected on the previous 5 days since my Dad's stroke. I remembered the first 6 hours that I spent with him, my hopefulness when he tightly and fiercely gripped my hand, never letting go, looking into my eyes and showing expression when I told him we all loved him and were coming to his side, and as he tried to lift his head off the pillow. I remembered also, the excruciating pain, arriving the next day to his hospital room to find him in a

coma from drugs administered to sedate him. How he never again regained consciousness. I thought about our lives, how much Dad's influence was surging through our veins, how he had transformed himself throughout his life to respond to the needs of his family, even when it meant stretching far beyond the bounds of what was normal and comfortable for him. I remembered all our conversations about how surprising his life turned out; how remarkable the transitions were that affected all of us. And, I promised him then, as he lay dying, that I would write a book about his life. I would do it to honor him, for our healing. And, to be true to the way Dad lived his life, this book would be one that would also help others and make their lives better.

Dad took his last breath around 8 pm on Wednesday, January 21, 2015. Strangely, I was not with him as I thought I would be. When Gail called to tell me, I was taking care of my Mom, and with my daughter, Alex, and her boyfriend, Steve. I think Dad wanted it that way. He always wanted me to be closer to my Mom. When I told Mom that Dad was gone, she broke out into a song in her native Church Slavonic tongue. It was haunting and beautiful. She told me it's what you sing to help the soul on its journey.

After spending a few moments with Mom, Alex and Steve, I drove to hospice alone, to be with my siblings and my Dad. My siblings told me they were in Dad's hospice room when he passed, but they weren't by his side either, like I thought they would be. They were talking to the nurse, telling her funny stories about Dad and his life, when he passed on his own. It's the way I'm sure he wanted it.

Since I was back in Dad's room, my siblings were again off the clock, and they left after a while. I

remember how strange it felt watching them walk down the hall and out the door as if in a trance. It was surreal. I stayed with dad, feeling his presence all around me. I must admit, it was a little frightening. I had never been in a room with someone, let alone a significant other, who had just passed. I placed flowers on his bed and talked to him, prayed for his soul. Until, I suddenly *felt* him talking to me, saying, “Go back to the house. That’s where the life is, that’s where the party is, celebrate me there with all the family. That’s where I’m going. See you there!” It was incredible and I knew it was time to leave. I left Dad’s body lying in the hospice bed alone. There was absolutely no one around. It was late, it was dark. Dad’s soul had even left by that time. I walked the long dark corridor alone and out the door.

Little did I know, when I promised to write about Dad’s life, that the book would be about how his death influenced *my life*.

That decision, as I came to find out, was Dad’s.